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**"Shared challenges, shared futures:
Taking the neighbourhood policy
forward"**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Neighbourhood Policy Conference

Brussels, 3 September 2007

Your Excellencies,
Honoured guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by welcoming you all to this conference today. The EU attaches great importance to its European Neighbourhood Policy, and the excellent turnout today confirms that our closest partners share this view.

Five years ago, the European Union had a vision. On the eve of the biggest enlargement in its history, it dreamed of a zone of stability, prosperity and co-operation shared with all its 'new' neighbours-to-be.

Clearly, it was said at the time, the quality of our relations would largely depend on the political will on either side. But it was the Commission's responsibility to come up with a way of improving relations with all these countries.

And so the idea of a European Neighbourhood Policy was born. A policy that makes clear that the EU has a strong commitment to stability and prosperity in the region. A policy that is established on partnerships that offer Europe's neighbours substantial encouragement and support in their reform efforts, if they want it.

Despite its short life, the European Neighbourhood Policy has already achieved a lot. We have assessed these first results, and proposed ideas to our Member States for fine-tuning the policy, and injecting greater vigour.

That was the purpose of the Communication we published last December, which suggested more economic and trade integration; visa facilitation; scholarships and exchange programmes; new regional-level activities in the East; greater political cooperation (including in addressing regional conflicts); and additional financing mechanisms.

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner will go into more detail about these proposals in a moment.

For now let me emphasise how important it is that we have this opportunity to hear your reaction to our proposals, and what you would like us to focus on in the future. After all, building a special partnership together is in the interest of all of us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that some have questioned the logic behind the ENP, questioned whether countries with such different societies, histories and traditions should, or even can, be brought together in one policy approach.

But that ignores an important point: by focusing attention on the wider European and Mediterranean area, the ENP has leveraged more support from the EU's Member States than when we looked at each of our neighbours in isolation. No longer is the level of attention paid to one country or region dependent on the special interest of whatever EU Member State happens to be holding the Council Presidency at the time.

The ENP has spurred the Member States to think harder about the future of the whole of this corner of our planet, and the need to address our common challenges now.

This has resulted in more money for ENP assistance programmes, and new opportunities for closer cooperation with the EU.

This brings me to another point that can never be stressed enough: that the fundamental principle of ENP is differentiation. The ENP is not, and never has been, a one-size-fits-all policy. There are as many variations of ENP as there are partners. We cannot and do not wish to ignore the differences between our partners.

As a political entity composed of 27 different nation states and therefore 27 different ways of organising our societies, we in the EU are the last people to expect or demand homogeneity!

With each of our ENP partners we craft a specific and unique relationship. That was the spirit which informed the first Action Plans. Quite simply, each Action Plan focuses on the policies, strategies and instruments which meet the priority needs of the individual country concerned.

Where countries indicated that they had higher ambitions, and wanted to go further in developing their relationship with the EU, we responded - whether that be with an aviation agreement, a memorandum of understanding on energy or additional assistance for border management.

As the policy develops, this differentiation will become more pronounced. When we launched the policy, we had to make it clear that the offer on the table was the same for everyone, with no discrimination. But as we get further and further away from the starting line, I expect we will see a more and more varied landscape, with as many different types of relationship developing as we have partners, but always within the common framework of the ENP.

It will be clear that there is a very different relationship between the EU and each of its neighbours, reflecting how close we are to each other in implementing the common values we share, the specific nature of each partner's economy, and the desires and aspirations you have for your relationship with the EU.

In sum, it's a case of more for more. The closer you want to be to the EU, and the greater your commitment to reform, the more we will offer you in terms of both assistance to reach those goals, and opportunities to expand and deepen our relations.

As we look to the future we will continue to emphasise differentiation – albeit within a common framework. We will continue to respond to the way your countries choose to go and the choices you make.

Let me repeat: we stand firm on the principle that this is not about forcing any country in a particular direction. It is about responding to the decisions you make towards realising our common vision of a zone of stability and prosperity.

And we are committed to the idea that each country shapes its relationship with us individually.

Differentiation is vital, then. But let's not downplay the other side of the coin – the obvious way in which our fates are tied together by our shared European and Mediterranean space.

We are not trying to force artificial links between countries with very different interests and needs. But it would be equally foolish to pretend we don't face common challenges; equally foolish to claim that there is no benefit in exchanging experiences and discussing policy responses to those challenges.

I'm thinking here of the need to harness the energy unleashed by globalisation to maximise economic growth and job creation. I'm thinking of the need to protect our environment and tackle climate change. I'm thinking of the imperative to safeguard our citizens from terrorist acts.

Let me take energy as an example. Reinforcing energy security in the EU-ENP area is a key priority for cooperation with our neighbourhood partners.

The European Commission will continue to develop strong energy relations in this region. Our partnerships with Ukraine and Azerbaijan serve as an excellent example which will be followed by new energy partnerships with Egypt and Algeria. We hope to finalise a Memorandum of Understanding with Egypt before the end of this year.

There are advantages in sharing experience in this, and many other areas, even between countries with very different geography and history.

Why shouldn't countries on the Black Sea, and countries on the Mediterranean, have something to gain from talking to each other about maritime safety, for example? And why not broaden that debate? I expect the discussion on energy and climate change later this morning will be just one example of a useful learning experience for us all.

And let's not forget the regional dimension. Based on our own successful experience of regional integration in the EU, we consider that a number of common challenges can only be addressed through regional integration.

That's why we will continue to promote regional and sub-regional cooperation among our neighbours. The ENP does not supplant the regional processes that already exist. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is as important as ever - the cornerstone of our regional dialogue between the EU and our Mediterranean partners.

We recognise the value of initiatives that mobilise the whole of the EU to work with you, beyond your more long-standing partners within the EU.

Similarly, we see the need to enhance regional dialogue where that is not so firmly entrenched, which is why we recently launched the Black Sea Synergy.

Nevertheless, it is vital for us to ensure that bilateral relations promoted under the ENP, and the regional and sub-regional approaches just mentioned, complement each other.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope these few words have convinced you of the strength of our commitment to your countries. Today's conference is an important part of that commitment. The feedback you give us will help to shape the European Neighbourhood Policy for years to come. And that can only benefit us all.

Thank you.