Wider Europe, neighbourhood: a new framework for relations with Eastern and Southern neighbours

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The Council held a policy debate on the "Wider Europe" initiative and the Union's relations with its Eastern and Southern neighbours. The Permanent Representatives Committee will oversee further work so as to enable the Council to return to this subject at a forthcoming meeting. The "Wider Europe" initiative is based on the conviction that the EU's enlargement on 1 May 2004 - which represents a historic step for the European contintent - also presents a unique opportunity to strengthen co-operation and interdependence with those countries that will soon find themselves at the Union's frontiers. The Council's debate highlighted the need to take account of the specific situations within individual Eastern and Mediterranean neighbours and relations between them while strengthening co-operation and interdependence. There was broad agreement among delegations in the need for a differentiated approach and the issue of benchmarking to assess progress towards established objectives. The debate further confirmed that criminality including, human trafficking and illegal immigration, as well as the promotion of the human rights are important issues that will require careful examination in the framework of future work on "Wider Europe". Soem delegations considered that the structure of the European Conference - which was established in 1997 - will require review. In light of the views expressed by some delegations on the financial dimension to the Union's relations with neighbouring countries, the Presidency suggested that further discussion would be required on the use of existing instruments. The Presidency also emphasised that discussion on the Wider Europe should not prejudge the question of the future of EU membership.