The Union's policies: a Northern dimension, Russia and Baltic countries. Vienna European Council

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The 2003 Progress Report is an overview of the Commission's implementation of the Northern Dimension Action Plan. It covers the period from summer 2002 to autumn 2003. As the report notes, the most important event to have taken place during this period was the conclusion of EU accession negotiations with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2002. Over the last few months the EU has continued to offer financial support totalling some EUR 1 440 million to these countries. It was also during this period that the second Northern Dimension Action Plan was authorised by the European Council in October 2003 thus allowing for an uninterrupted continuation of work so far completed. The Report notes that there has been a successful continuation of dialogue between the European Commission and Russia resulting in, inter alia, the signing OF a facilitated transit regime to and from Kaliningrad through the EU as well as a EUR 25 million programme for Kaliningrad under the 2004-06 Tacis programme. As well as bi-lateral negotiations, the Commission has continued to co-operate with interested regional bodies such as the CBSS Task Force on Organised Crime and Communicable Diseases. In terms of "Priority Sectors" the Commission notes progress in areas such as business friendly legislation, the removal of barriers to trade and investment, the promotion of policies for entrepreneurship and the European Charter for Small Enterprises. Energy undoubtedly plays an important part in any discussion between the EU and those countries covered by the Northern Dimension Action Plan. As such the Commission has maintained vital and on-going Energy talks with Russia and central and eastern European countries. Areas of common interest have been identified and include the development of the Shtokman field, the inter-connection of the electricity grids, the northern trans-European gas pipeline and the Yamal European pipeline. Similarly, the European Commission has relied on the Northern Dimension Action Plan as a useful platform for launching and initiating contact on other areas of common interest not least in the field of Transport (pan-European corridors/maritime safety), Telecommunications (Northern eDimention Action Plan), Scientific Research and Public Health. The Report also notes useful and positive progress in Environmental policy areas particularly as far as Nuclear Safety is concerned. Lithuania, for example, has committed itself to closing down Unit 1 of the Ignalia NPP before 2005 and of Unit 2 by 31 December 2009. Relevant INTERREG programmes are reviewed and the introduction of "Neighbourhood Programmes" aired. The Commission's Communication on neighbourhood programmes was adopted in March 2003 with the specific aim of creating neighbourhood instruments. To conclude, from a political point of view, the most important events to have taken place in the period under review would be the signing of the accession agreements with the candidate countries as well as the adoption of the Second Northern Dimension Action Plan, set to come into force on 1 January 2004. The implementation of the second Northern Dimension Action Plan is expected to benefit from the introduction of the Neighbourhood programme. As the Report notes, the political achievements and the positive results obtained by concrete co-operation activities should lay encouraging foundations for the challenging period to come after 1 May 2004.