

Honorable President of the European Commission!

Excellencies!

Ladies and Gentlemen!

15 years ago, in December 1992, an Estonian citizen wanting to travel to Finland, had to stand in line in the winter cold to apply for a visa. A Finn wanting to come to Tallinn needed a visa too. 10 years ago, in December 1997, Estonians or Finns travelling between our respective capitals could do so without visas, but grim, often gruff border guards carefully scrutinized every passport upon entry as well as departure: four times altogether on a round trip.

Today, the Finnish Prime Minister, Matti Vanhanen, stepped directly off the ferry from Helsinki into Tallinn, no lines, no checks, no stamping of passports. This was not a special privilege accorded the Prime Minister of Finland, he merely exercised his right as a European citizen, because, as of midnight, Estonia is a member of the Schengen visa space.

Last year, nine million travelers, eight million from Schengen countries, passed through Tallinn harbour. As of today, they will see Estonian border guards only when our Border Guard Orchestra happens to be performing at the harbour.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia are now able to say, "Welcome to the Schengen Area". We can do so because we trust our fellow EU members and they trust us, we believe our external borders are those of the EU, and that it is in the interest of all EU citizens to be able to move in the Union as we move in our own countries – freely and without hindrances. We believe in an open and secure Europe. Our trust in member states is one of the cornerstones of the European Union.

I thank all Estonian border guards and government officials in Tallinn and Brussels, as well as our friends in the European Union who helped us become Schengen-ready including the Portuguese Presidency and the European Commission.

In 1985, in a village called Schengen in Luxembourg, the Benelux countries, Germany and France decided to eliminate mutual border controls. Today, the word Schengen has become an inseparable part of the character of the European Union. Today the Schengen visa space is a borderless home to more than 400 million Europeans.

What does Schengen mean in terms of the reality on the ground? It means an ordinary citizen can start out from the small village of Nuorgam at the top of Lapland, 1,300 kilometers North of here, and travel to the southern tip of Tenerife in Las Galletas, 5,600 kilometers to the South without once having to show his or her passport. Moreover, she or he can also stop on the way in Norway or Iceland, also Schengen countries.

Schengen means also that cargo, the goods we produce in our Union will move faster and more smoothly.

The word Schengen means openness based on trust. And it means responsibility as well.

Estonia, like the other countries that joined Schengen today at midnight is now responsible for protecting the European Union's external border not only for the benefit of Estonia, but for all the citizens of Europe. We accept this responsibility. Our border guards are well-trained and dedicated, equipped with state-of-the-art technology, cooperating seamlessly with police and judicial institutions from our fellow EU countries.

Today, along with the elimination of internal border controls, the citizens of nine European countries have lost their last reason to say, "I'm going to Europe" when leaving home to visit Paris, Rome or Lisbon. We are at home, our common European home.

That's the way it should be between friends. Our mutual trust, of which the Schengen visa space is one expression, makes us all stronger.

Thank you!