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"The Community: A vital element in any futur European structure"

Mr Bruce Millan, the European Commissloner for Regional Policies, speaking in Belfast on January 11th, 1990, discussed the changes in Eastern Europe over the last 6 months. These changes have come upon us at breath-taking speed and call into question "the assumptions which we have made about the conduct of Intra-European affairs - whether economic, political, or concerned with security - for the past 40 years," said Mr Millan.

Mr Millan, reviewing the internal and external challenges for the Community in the 1990s emphasized the necessity for careful analysis and accurate response to developments, the full results of which could not yet be comprehensively gauged.

"The changes we have seen in Eastern Europe since last summer require the development of a new form or new forms of relationship between the Community and those countries. It is too early to say what Mr Gorbachev's "European house" or Mr James Baker's "Europe whole and free" or President Mitterrand's "confederation" might look like. As Jacques Delors said in an interview with The Irish Times last week, we must build up these new relationships "brick by brick".

This pragmatic approach must, however, be based on a number of firm principles. The first of these is clearly self-determination. Not only do we look for the process of change within Eastern Europe to continue and lead as soon as possible to the establishment of democratically elected governments. We also regard it as a matter for those governments to decide the future pattern of their relationships both with their fellow Eastern European countries and with Western Europe.

A second underlying principle in our approach is that political development in Eastern Europe must be matched by economic development. Nothing could be more destabilising in the medium and longer term and more damaging to current efforts to break down the division we have lived with for 40 years than a widening gap between the economic performances of the two halves of the continent. The

West - not just the Community, but 24 Western Governments - are already involved in a coordinated aid effort for Poland and Hungary which will no doubt soon be extended to other Eastern European countries. Proposals for A Bank for Reconstruction and Development are under active discussion. Trade concessions have also been made and more are in the pipeline. It is important to help these countries establish as quickly as possible an enterprise sector and the financial and other institutions necessary to move towards a more market-oriented economy. Training and technical assistance will obviously be an important part of what the Community can offer!

A clear attitude towards Germany is a third element in the Community's approach to recent changes. Once again, self-determination is the starting point. As the Community's Heads of State and Government said in the conclusions of their meeting in Strasbourg, the process of reunification "should take place peacefully and democratically, in full respect of the relevant agreements and treaties and of all the principles defined by the Helsinki final Act in a context of dialogue and East-West cooperation. It also has to be placed in the perspective of European integration". This list of conditions is a reminder of the sensitivity of this issue and the difficulties involved in unwinding the arrangements agreed at Yalta and subsequently reinforced by four decades of history. These complexities should not, however, be allowed to obscure the fact that if East Germany becomes a pluralist democracy with an open economy, the possibility of membership of the Community must be open to it.

Having said that, it seems to me unwise to try to determine in more detail at this stage what the shape of the "new Europe" will be. The best thing which the Community can do at present is to strengthen itself as a reference point and pole of attraction for the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe. It is not just as individual democracies that the Twelve have exercised and will continue to exercise a magnetic effect on their neighbours to the East. It is also in the common enterprise they have undertaken in the Community, and the political and economic cooperation that comes from that.

The Community is thus under the spotlight. Our response to these exciting developments - and we must respond - will be closely watched. But we must not become dazzled by the spotlight and the excitement. We should not forget that we too have problems to resolve. There is understandably some nervousness among the weaker regions, sectors and social groups within the Community that political attention has been snatched away from them and that the Eastern European countries will compete with them directly for financial resources. It is up to the Community's leaders to allay these concerns. We must help Eastern Europe but that must not be done at the expense of our own weaker regions. Otherwise, doubt will be cast on the solidarity of the Community and it is only through solidarity and a common sense of purpose that the Community can realise its ambitions and remain the sound foundation of which a new Europe can be built."