

The EU and Armenia: Fully exploiting the potential for a closer relationship

As the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy I look forward to stepping up efforts to build closer relations with Armenia.

With the launching of the Eastern Partnership in May of last year, EU relations with Armenia entered a new phase. The EU and its Eastern partners, including Armenia, have committed themselves to bringing their relationships to a higher level. We seek to lay a new legal foundation for our relations through an Association Agreement. It should also provide for the setting up of a deep and comprehensive Free Trade Area which in due course will allow Armenia access to the EU's market of 500 million consumers. This will give trade and investment a strong push and generate economic jobs and growth in Armenia. Importantly, we also want to help realise the long-term goal of visa free travel between Armenia and the EU.

I fully appreciate the efforts made by Armenia over the last years in the implementation of major reform plans. While reflecting Armenia's own political will, they were politically encouraged and often financially supported by the EU. In spite of domestic, regional and also economic challenges (we are well aware of the impact of the financial crisis, and have decided to provide macro-financial assistance), Armenia has thus demonstrated a strong European aspiration over the years. Now is the time to build on these achievements and to move to a higher gear in our relationship, political association and economic integration.

This in turn will require further reform steps in Armenia itself. In particular, by strengthening rule of law, reforms will result in more freedom for individuals and more open markets for businesses thereby stimulating further economic growth and prosperity. These are reforms needed first and foremost by and for the citizens of Armenia, while they will also help advance the EU-Armenia cooperation agenda.

Regional stability is key to the country, to the region and to Europe as a whole. As Commissioner for Enlargement and the Neighbourhood Policy, I strongly support the efforts made by Armenia and Turkey to turn a page in their history and build a new future.. Clearly, the ratification and implementation of the protocols establishing diplomatic relations and developing bilateral relations would be a significant step towards peace and stability across the wider region. The EU will also step up its efforts in support of a settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The EU has now a new Treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, which gives EU the power to speak with one voice. Together with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, Catherine Ashton, we will work to ensure that Europe brings to this region the whole set of external relations toolkit, from foreign policy instruments to financial assistance and trade. This will allow Europe to engage more actively with partners from this region.

The future offers many opportunities. We have to seize them and to work hard, in a joint effort, to translate our common vision for a peaceful and prosperous Southern Caucasus into reality. I count on Armenia's playing an active role in this endeavour.

Štefan FÜLE, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy