

More than just energy: Bringing Azerbaijan closer to the EU

As the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy I want to ensure that the EU and Azerbaijan fully exploit the potential of cooperation.

Azerbaijan is a key partner for the European Union for many reasons. The country's geostrategic location at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and its energy resources are only two of them. Azerbaijan has confirmed its ambition to make full use of the opportunities offered by the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, the EU framework for cooperation with its Eastern partners.

Energy is central to our relationship. Azerbaijan plays a key role as a producer and also for transit. Europe offers an attractive market for producers who wish to diversify their customer structure. This provides the basis for a constructive relationship which is of benefit both to Azerbaijan and Europe. We count on Azerbaijan's continued commitment to help us develop the Southern Corridor which will provide for the shipping of gas from Azerbaijan and the wider region to Europe. European companies are prime investors in developing Azerbaijan's full export potential of hydrocarbon products.

The Eastern Partnership provides significant opportunities to strengthen EU-Azerbaijan cooperation, beyond energy. It offers a number of concrete steps to strengthen ties between the EU and partner countries. Let me highlight two of them.

First, the intended negotiation of an Association Agreement will pave the way for a broader and deeper partnership between the EU and Azerbaijan. This includes the objective of a deep and comprehensive Free Trade Area, as a key instrument to provide in due course Azerbaijan with access to the EU market of 500 million consumers. This will increase trade and investment between the EU and Azerbaijan and help generate further economic growth and jobs in Azerbaijan, including in sectors other than energy. We will help Azerbaijan in its efforts to join the World Trade Organisation which is a necessary step before the EU can negotiate a free trade area with Azerbaijan.

Secondly, the Eastern Partnership has set the long term goal of making visa free travel possible between Azerbaijan and the EU. This is an ambitious prospect, to which citizens from both the EU and Azerbaijan pay a lot of attention. We will work with our partners in Azerbaijan to make sure the necessary steps are taken so that one day their citizens could enjoy free travel to Europe.

This in turn means that Azerbaijan allows us to move forward in our relationship while delivering on some other issues. In particular, strengthening respect for the rule of law is very important. This is not only for the benefit of increased cooperation with the EU, but first and foremost for the benefit of Azerbaijan's citizens. In undertaking these reforms, Azerbaijan can continue to count on the EU full support.

The EU also wants to promote peace across the region. As Commissioner for Enlargement and the Neighbourhood Policy, I will give my full support to Baroness Ashton - the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice

President of the Commission - as she seeks to step up the EU's efforts in support of a settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The European Union and Azerbaijan have a mutual interest in developing a broad and stable relationship. This will benefit the people of Azerbaijan and of the EU, as our credibility on the international stage depends on our capacity to shape a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood.

Štefan FÜLE, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy